

Units of Study
in the Primary
Classroom

Growing Readers

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Foreword by Lucy Calkins

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RECENTLY I WAS ON THE SELECTION COMMITTEE for assistant principal at my school, P.S. 321 in Brooklyn. Part of the committee's responsibility was to comb through the resumés and personal statements of the educators who wanted to be considered for the position. I read the files with curiosity, putting myself in the place of these applicants who were trying to create an image of themselves on paper.

Looking at the beautifully designed resumés, I was fascinated by the variety of ways these educators had found to describe their methods of teaching reading and writing: "balanced literacy", "comprehensive literacy", "workshop approach to literacy", "process", "phonics-based", "literature-based" and so on. But the names used for literacy approaches rarely left me with a picture of what the applicants really meant and believed about the teaching of reading and writing.

Fortunately, another part of the application required the candidates to describe their beliefs about teaching and learning. This was where they could really define themselves. Some people wrote lush paragraphs full of classroom anecdotes, while others wrote succinct statements that went straight to the point. After reading about a dozen of these personal statements, I started thinking about how I would answer the question, What are your beliefs about teaching and learning? I realised it is not as simple to answer as it seems. Even though I have strong ideas about teaching and learning and strive to put my beliefs into practice every day, it can still be difficult to articulate them.

To answer this question for myself, I considered the times in my own life when I've learned best and the conditions that were present in those situations. Then I had to expand my thinking, because there are so many different kinds of learning styles that we have to imagine the conditions that make learning possible for all learners, not just for learners like ourselves.

This book is meant to help teachers launch and maintain an independent reading workshop in their classrooms. However, the independent reading workshop does not happen in isolation from the rest of the day. It's crucial for us to consider the whole day of our teaching, the classroom tone and expectations we set from arrival to dismissal and our belief system about teaching and learning.

So before I get into the nuts and bolts of the independent reading workshop, I share here some of my beliefs about teaching and learning that seem most important to make the independent reading workshop and indeed all components of the school day, effective for all learners. These beliefs include

- the ongoing pursuit of knowledge
- the importance of safety and consistency
- the importance of providing opportunities for independence
- the power of a print-rich, talk-rich, inviting classroom
- the value of clear and high expectations.

I invite you, too, to think about your beliefs about teaching and learning and to consider the ways your beliefs are evident throughout the day in your

classroom practice. It's important for us to check in with our own belief systems on occasion to make sure that what's happening in our classrooms reflects our beliefs about best practices.

The Ongoing Pursuit of Knowledge

We teachers have a huge responsibility to know our subject matter, our students and our teaching. These three things are always evolving and it's our job to keep up with the changes.

As teachers of reading, we need to know what's going on in the field of reading beyond our region's prevailing model. This means we have to continue to educate ourselves about the reading process and learning issues. We need to be sure our knowledge base about reading is ever-growing and that it leads us to more inquiries in our teaching. The best teachers I know never feel like they've mastered it and so they keep trying to figure things out. It's as if there's a carrot forever dangling in front of them.

It's helpful to talk to colleagues about our teaching. Although it may feel more comfortable and affirming to talk to like-minded colleagues, it's also important to talk to teachers who might do things differently. Listening to those who have different ideas keeps us open-minded and it can help us clarify, strengthen and amend our own beliefs and practice.

I can't emphasise enough the power of being part of a supportive network of teachers. I've been fortunate to be involved with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project throughout my teaching life. Lucy Calkins, the founding director, provides many different venues for teachers to come together to share ideas, study with experts, confront difficulties and perhaps most important, to know we're not alone.

This idea of continuing to learn about our subject matter and learning from our colleagues, of course, extends to learning about our students. I listen closely to everything my students say, especially when they don't know I'm listening. I watch my students' interactions with classmates and other adults throughout the day in order to add more details to the picture I have of each child.

When we closely observe our students, we learn about them, of course, but we can also learn about our teaching. One of my former students was also one of my most important teachers. I noticed that Shakeem seemed reluctant to participate during lessons and class discussions. I didn't consider him to be shy and he was a strong student, so it seemed sort of strange that I rarely heard his voice. I talked to Shakeem's parents about how quiet he was and how I was trying to get him to participate more. They were surprised to hear this. "He's usually very outgoing and doesn't seem intimidated by groups", his parents told me, as they recounted different situations in which he had participated with enthusiasm. We were puzzled, so I began to watch closely for times when Shakeem did express his ideas in class.

I noticed that he often participated during maths lessons. During literacy work, however, Shakeem was silent. He rarely contributed to a book talk or

Scheduling the Literacy Day

How to schedule the literacy day is one of the most frequently asked questions at workshops and presentations and it's one of the hardest questions to answer. Every school has particular issues, such as overcrowding, so that in some buildings students have to go to lunch at 10:15 a.m. in order for the school to cycle all the students through the lunch room. In other places, teachers are forced to have a 90-minute literacy block with every single minute mandated by the administration. Still other schools have one half-day per week off for children so that teachers can have professional development. This doesn't include field trips or school assemblies. There must be hundreds of permutations of burdens that teachers endure with regard to scheduling, so I acknowledge that it can be almost impossible to propose a schedule good for everyone. Having said that, I share herewith a possible classroom schedule:

Sample Schedule for a Literacy Day

8:30 a.m.	<i>Arrival, morning jobs, library time</i>
8:45	Morning meeting
9:00	Shared reading
9:15	Independent reading workshop
10:05	Word study
10:15	Writing workshop
11:10	Interactive read-aloud with accountable talk
11:30	<i>Lunch and outdoor play</i>
12:15 p.m.	Quiet time, free reading
12:20	Maths workshop
1:15	Humanities and social sciences, science, art, choice time
1:45	Preparation
2:35	Story time
2:50	Homework, pack up
3:00	<i>Dismissal</i>

Arrival, Morning Jobs, Library Time

Children arrive and do morning jobs. As they do their morning jobs, I greet them, gather notes, try to check homework and do all the usual first-thing-in-the-morning tasks that teachers have to do. After children finish their morning jobs, they may go to the classroom library and read anything with anybody until it's time for the morning meeting to begin.

Morning Meeting

During the morning meeting in the class meeting area, we go over the schedule for the day and do the quick maths work that our maths program requires. Three days a week, we do interactive writing via a kind of morning message.

Shared Reading

In the class meeting area, we start with a familiar shared text to warm up and then work on the current work text, which we use for several days. A few times a week, I end the session by introducing a new text that we'll use as a work text in the future. The texts I most often use for shared reading are Big Books, short poems or interactive writing pieces that we've created.

Independent Reading Workshop

After shared reading and before beginning the independent reading workshop, I ask children to leave the meeting area to get their independent book bins and take them to their seats. This gets them up and moving before they come back to the meeting area for a mini-lesson.

Word Study

No matter what method you use to teach word study, phonics and spelling, it is crucial to facilitate the transfer of these skills to children's own reading and writing. They need to understand that the things they learn during word study will help them as they write and read. I incorporate handwriting and letter formation practice into the word study session.

Writing Workshop

After word study and before beginning writing workshop, I ask the children to leave the meeting area to get their writing folders and writing tools ready for writing time. Again, my purpose is to get the children moving, if only briefly, so that they'll be ready to focus on the writing mini-lesson. Writing workshop follows the same structure as reading workshop: mini-lesson, work time and then share time.

Interactive Read-Aloud with Accountable Talk

In the class meeting area, students sit next to their read-aloud partners to listen to and talk about the book I'm reading aloud. This is an opportunity to work on comprehension and conversation strategies. I read a variety of types of texts, including picture books, chapter books, short stories, poetry and nonfiction throughout the year.

Quiet Time, Free Reading

When the children return from lunch, I give them 5 minutes or so to calm down and read anything from their book bins. They may talk quietly to the children sitting next to them about their books.

I CONFESS I USE A LOT OF MENTAL MANIPULATION in my teaching. Don't worry though. It's not diabolical, I don't profit monetarily and nobody gets hurt. It's just a teaching tool that I use to help things go my way in the classroom. Here's an example of what I mean. During the morning meeting on the first day of school, I look around at the fresh haircuts, bright new sneakers and sweet faces and say, "Do you realise that you guys have a great job this year? Yep. It's a great job. You are Year 1 students and you are so lucky to have such a great job." It's actually the old "these are the best days of your lives" speech miniaturised for six-year-olds.

The students usually look a bit confused or uninterested, so I go on to explain, "My job here is to be a Year 1 *teacher* and your job is to be Year 1 *students*. I love my job because I get to work with kids and use the paper cutter and have lots of birthday cupcakes, but I have to say that you guys definitely have a very cool job, too. Talk to someone sitting next to you about the cool stuff you can do on your job as Year 1 students." I listen in as the students turn to someone sitting next to them and predictably list recess, block building during choice time, bathroom passes and eating lunch in the big-kid lunch room as some cool things about being in Year 1.

After a few minutes, I pull the class back together: "I listened in as you guys talked about some great things about being Year 1 students like recess and blocks and lunch, but you know what I think is the best part of being a first grader? I think the best part is that you'll get time to read *every day*. Imagine that. Reading time is built into your job, *every day* and you are so lucky. Not many jobs in the world have reading time built right into them every day."

Now, of course, I realise that to consider daily reading time a great boon may be a stretch for some children, particularly those who already feel like struggling readers or who have other kinds of anxiety about reading. And in spite of our most private teacher fantasies, we need to admit that there are children who begin Year 1 just not very interested in picking up a book.

For these reasons, I begin my year by talking about reading in a way that is enthusiastic, genuine and comforting. I essentially launch a public relations campaign about the joy of reading. I want to make reading something to love, not just something to learn. We teachers exert a lot of power over the tone of our classes and the attitudes of our students and when we are excited about something, our students become excited about it, too. I call this phenomenon the contagious enthusiasm principle, which, I suppose, sounds better than calling it mental manipulation.

Goals and Bends in the Road

These first few weeks of school are precious and the teaching opportunities are fleeting. When I hear teachers say, "Oh, I don't get any teaching done at the beginning of the year, it's all procedures and management", I want to tell them that spending time on procedures and management in the beginning is, in fact, good teaching and a good time investment. As I've said before, when

we slow down and spend time early in the year establishing a solid foundation for our reading work, we don't have to spend time throughout the year working on management issues. And doing a few lessons on acceptable noise level at the beginning of the year isn't nearly as frustrating as needing to do those same lessons over and over again throughout the year ...

During the first few weeks of school my teaching goals are to establish the solid foundation necessary for children to work independently and effectively during independent reading workshop and to instil the essential habits (see planning chart). In *Reading with Meaning* (2002), Debbie Miller writes that the work we do at the beginning of the year “less about teaching children how to read and more about modelling and teaching children what it is that good readers do, setting the tone for the workshop and establishing its expectation and procedures and engaging and motivating children to want to learn to read.”

In this first unit of study or any unit for that matter, our teaching does not follow a straight and linear path to meet our goals. Instead, there are bends in the road that we take in our teaching so that we can reach our goals. At each bend in the road we teach a string of mini-lessons to help children move along towards the goals we have set.

The bends in the road of my teaching during this first unit of study are:

- Readers have reading identities and share them with each other.
- Readers take care of books and the classroom library.
- Readers understand the reading workshop procedures so that all readers can do their best work.
- Readers stay focused on their reading.
- Readers think and talk about books with others.

Each bend in the road has a series of mini-lessons to go with it. The mini-lessons originate from three sources: the goals for our work together, the teacher's knowledge of the reading process and the needs of our students. Of course, each teaching situation is different, so my bends in the road may be different from other teachers' or occur in a different sequence.

In the sections that follow, I describe the work that I and other teachers have done during this unit of study, Readers Build Good Habits.

Reading Identities: “Wait! I’m Only Six!”

In the early days of the school year, we all scramble to get to know our students. Like many teachers, I send home a first-day letter that includes a brief questionnaire for parents. One question is always the same: “Please tell me anything about your child that you think would be helpful for me to know.” The responses, ranging from none to long biographies of the child's short life, are helpful, but I often find that they give me more information about the parents or families than about the child.

I can always turn to my students' Foundation year teachers, who provide important academic and social information about the children. I find,

Of course, four other children will then want to join when they discover their latent love for Eric Carle's books or perhaps their desire to be in a book club. When Patrick showed his battleship book, I asked the class if anyone else was interested in battleships. When children raised their hands, I suggested that they get together with Patrick before morning meeting to read about battleships together.

In the meantime, I'm always trying to listen for the children's life interests because I want our classroom library to reflect them as much as possible. When I eavesdropped on a conversation and learned that Cassidy was trying to talk his family into getting a dog, I gathered a few dog books and showed Cassidy where they were in the classroom library. As our line made its way to the lunch room, I overheard Erik and Molly debating the pros and cons of picking scabs. I told them I had a great human body book that might answer the age-old question to pick or not to pick.

I busily forage for students' interests in the early days of the school year. I know I'll find interests that may be real and long-term, like Cassidy and dogs or short-lived and small, like Molly, Erik, and scabs. Both types of interests can be represented and pursued in the classroom library.

Another way we can uncover the reading identities of our students is to have them sketch their favourite reading memories. Teachers may wonder whether it's possible to pull reading memories from the minds of six-year-olds. The trick to this is to have lots of talk around reading memories before sending the students off to sketch their own. To help them do this, I gathered my class at the meeting area in front of my easel and taught the following mini-lesson.

Mini-lesson

Connection

We've been talking a lot about the kinds of books we love to read, but I still want to learn more about what you do as readers. Besides talking about your favourite books, I thought we could talk about our favourite reading memories. I'd like to know about your best-ever reading moments, about the times when reading felt good for you.

One of the things I love to do when I think about memories is to make a quick sketch because sketching really helps me to picture my memory. Today, we're going to think about and share our best reading memory. I want to teach you how you might think about your favourite reading memory and sketch it so you can really picture it and help us to picture it, too. But first, may I show you a sketch of mine?

Of course, the class enthusiastically says yes because they see the text in my hand and the blank page on the easel or maybe just to find out if I can draw as well as their previous teacher.

Teaching point and demonstration

Well, I'm going to sketch my best reading memory for you guys.

As I sketch, I hum and talk to myself, trying to get my sketch done as quickly as possible. I hear the children chatting quietly as they try to figure out what I'm putting on the paper. I might remind them to just watch and not talk because I'm trying to lay the groundwork for what's expected of them during mini-lessons. Sometimes for this lesson I might use a sketch that I have prepared the night before, but I prefer to sketch in front of my students so they can see that sketching moves quickly and is not necessarily precise. I don't want them to be overwhelmed by the idea that they have to draw something incredibly representational. This is not an art lesson, after all.

There, I'm finished. [They see a rudimentary drawing of a time I was reading on the bus.] Did you notice how I sketched this picture quickly? I didn't need it to be perfect because I know I'm going to talk to you about it, too. I sketched myself reading on the bus. I love riding the bus to school because I can get lots of reading done on the long ride. I read different kinds of things, like the newspaper, books, school things, magazines and anything else I can get my eyes on. I just love to read on the bus because I don't get interrupted at all.

Take a second to close your eyes and see if you can picture me reading on the bus. You can think about my sketch and what I told you so that you can make a picture in your minds.

One of the reasons I draw myself on the bus is because I know that for most of my students a bus ride is not a daily event. I want to avoid providing the temptation to copy my drawing. Rather, I want them to think of their own reading memories and draw those.

Okay, so that's my reading memory that you're picturing in your minds, but soon you're going to get a chance to think of your own. Want to know a little secret? It was hard for me to decide to draw this one because I've got lots of great reading memories. Did you see how I decided on this and sketched it quickly? Did you notice how when I sketched it, I really tried to picture in my mind what it looked like when I was reading on the bus so that you guys could picture it, too?

Active engagement

How about you guys, are you ready? I bet you've all got reading memories you can share. I'm going to give you a little time right now to think about a reading memory that you have. Close your eyes and think about it and then turn and tell the person sitting next to you about your own best-ever reading memory. Okay, go ahead, think about your reading memory. Close your eyes so you can really picture it. [I give them about 10 seconds or so.] Okay, now turn and tell the person sitting next to you about your reading memory.

I listen in to some partner conversations. After a minute or so, I reconvene the class to report back what I heard.

I heard some great stuff out there. I heard Max say his great reading memory

Thinking to Notice and Support in Reading Centres

Children are doing this	When we hear them say things like this
Noticing overlapping information and/or discrepancies between books	Nonfiction Biography Centres (MLK Jr.): "All these books about Martin Luther King Jr. talk about how he loved to read when he was little." Nonfiction Biography Centres (MLK Jr.): "These two books tell that he died, but this one doesn't."
Accumulating information about a topic from different texts	Nonfiction Centres (Ants): "So far we've learned that ants have different kinds of jobs in their ant farms, like doctors, builders and other stuff."
Paying attention to surprising information, new information, information that contradicts prior knowledge or beliefs	Reading Projects Centres (Reading a Series: M&M): "I used to think I wouldn't like M&M because it's about girls, but they're pretty funny." Nonfiction Centres (Cats): "This book says that you have to wash your hands every time you touch your cat. That's just not true!"
Paying attention to new wonderings, developing new ideas	Nonfiction Centres (Insects): "This is weird. Ants have queen ants and bees have queen bees but they don't have kings. We're wondering why insects don't have kings."
Connecting the text to their own experiences in ways that deepen their understanding of the text	Favourite Character Centres (Henry and Mudge): "I can really understand how Henry must have felt when Mudge was lost because when my cat was lost, we had to look all over, too. I was so sad, just like Henry."
Attending to characteristics of the book, genre, author	Reading Projects Centres (Friendship Study): "We noticed that all these books on friendship always have troubles. Then they work them out and become friends again."
Looking for evidence to support their ideas	Favourite Author Centres (Miriam Cohen): "We're looking for all the places where Miriam Cohen makes Anna Maria seem mean."
Discussing/disagreeing	Reading Project Centres (Books that are sad): "We're talking about the places where the books get sad." Favourite Character Centres (Fox): "I think Fox is faking being sick, but Julia thinks he's really sick and not being a faker."
Planning their work	Favourite Character Centres (Frog and Toad): "We're going to put sticky notes on all the pages that show Frog and Toad are opposites. Then tomorrow we're going to find places where they act alike." Reading Projects Centres (Fairytale: Little Red Riding Hood): "We're going to try to read these pages and sound just like we think the characters will sound."

In addition to reading several books by the same author during read-aloud or shared reading, the teacher encourages children to think about authors' books they know and love. The immersion phase of the study involves mostly teacher-initiated exposure during read-aloud and shared reading to the work the children will soon be doing. In the immersion phase we tend not to teach mini-lessons in support of the unit during independent reading workshop. Instead, our mini-lessons for independent reading might revisit and remind students of print or comprehension strategies as needed. For work time, the children read their just-right books and meet with their reading partners to think and talk together as usual. Again, immersion often takes place outside of reading workshop, during read-aloud and shared reading especially.